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BOOKS

To tell the truth, the poet should wear a paper bag

POETIC LICENSE
ROBYN SARAH

At the Dylan Thomas Centre in Swansea, Wales, a friend relates, he met a man who had known the poet and who told of hearing Dylan asked, at a party, who were his favourite poets. The author of Fern Hill and of Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night reportedly replied, "I don't like poets, I like poems." My friend thought it an admirable sentiment.

I agree. But it's a sentiment rarely encountered in a literary culture ever more enamoured of the celebrity-worshipping, name-trumpeting ways of popular culture – the focus on persons and careers, the market mentality and jargon.

What do we do to "raise the profile" of poetry in Canada? We declare a Poetry Month – as if poetry didn't exist the rest of the year! – a sort of annual banaar, at which poets can "promote themselves." We debate the virtues of conferring laureateship upon a bard deserving of that honour. We establish a gala poetry prize with a substantial purse attached. Give poets their share of the public glitter, the money and pizzazz, the argument goes, and people will begin to take poetry more seriously.

This strikes me as cockeyed thinking. People are riveted to the Academy Awards because they're versed in movies and movie personalities; it isn't the other way around. People tune in to music awards because they know the songs and the singers. Who, outside of the poetry community (if indeed them!), has read the poems? Is glitzy noise about a poet really enough to induce people who don't read poems to start reading them?

By exposure and example, we cultivate in our children an appetite for movies and popular music. Not so for poems. Later, the task is harder. In the words of a college teacher who wrote to me: "Reaching the Walkman generation is tricky. Wrapped in sung words, they have to first step back to silence before they can listen to words dance by themselves." That's right. Silence is a precondition for poetry – but Walkman culture, in filling the day's interstices with personally selected sound, fosters an intolerance of silence.

Only through familiarity with poems does a person learn to hear poetry; to appreciate the subtleties of "words dancing by themselves." We have lost the habit of this kind of listening. It demands a quality of attentiveness we aren't used to bringing to bear on words – a degree of linguistic discernment we have allowed to atrophy. Dylan Thomas's assertion – that he liked poems, not poets – bespeaks that quality of attention; the ability to hear the dance of an individual set of words, to value it in and of itself, as distinct from the name or reputation or personality of its maker, or the personal axe that maker may have to grind.

Poets, after all, are mortal; poems, if they are good ones, may go on dancing long after their makers have given up the ghost. Not every poem will do this by any means, even of a great poet; but a few will, and lovers of poetry are hunters of these.

It is not unheard of for a mediocre poet to produce an unforgettable poem: some authors' names have survived on the basis of a single such poem that has come down in collective memory. Other author-names have failed to survive, though their poems live on. (That famous poet, Anonymous, left masterpieces in every language.) Individual poems can be touchstones, not only to individual readers but to entire cultures as they are passed down the generations, while their authors fade in memory.

The Canadian poet George Johnston, in the introductory essay to his Collected Poems, Endeared By Dark, makes this observation: "Poetry that survives in memory will become anonymous. Though it may be strong in personal feeling, it expresses nothing so much as poetry itself. ... If it is well-made and becomes well read and remembered by many or a few, it will free itself of its maker and live its own life, perhaps short, perhaps very long. The same may be said of a body of verse: once published it will be on its own and may or may not acknowledge its maker again."

We are, as a culture, fixated on fame – on the big name, the glittering reputation, the public persona, as the ultimate measure of worth. What a strange idea Johnston presents: that greatness in poetry naturally inclines to anonymity! I do not think he means that the poet's name is necessarily forgotten; only that the poem ultimately assumes the weight that the name, even if remembered, can no longer claim. The name becomes just a name; the poem is like a living thing. Memorable poems separate themselves in some fundamental way from their maker, transcend the particulars of the maker's life and the circumstances of their making. It is one of the mysteries of great poems that, far removed from those particulars, they go on speaking to successive generations, survive translation, cross linguistic and cultural barriers, and remain vital to their readers.

About the historical figure of William Shakespeare, whose name represents the crown of English literature, we know little. It has even been theorized that the verse plays and poems attributed to the man of this name were written by somebody else. What difference could it make to the poetry, or to those who have read and loved it, if such could be proven?

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
That alters when it alteration finds
Or bends with the remover to remove...

If we could verify exactly what manner of person wrote these lines, who exactly made the word-dance that has come down to us as Sonnet 116 – exactly when this bit of verbal alchemy took place, and under what circumstances – would it make a jot of difference to the lines? Would it cause them, spoken aloud, to roll off the tongue with any the more – or less – grace and grandeur?

"Shakespeare" is a code word for a transcendent body of plays and poems that have amazed and engaged us for centuries. Whoever Shakespeare may have been (or not been) in what we call "real life," it is this poetry that is "Shakespeare" now – a poetry whose real life no one can dispute.

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First-day cover of stamp honouring the man of bop, copied from the Thelonious Monk Web site.

Not so Mysterioso

Oh, the things they said about Thelonious Monk

The Thelonious Monk Reader
Robin van der Bliek, ed.
Oxford University Press, 206 pp, $42.95

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

He was born with the most distinctive name in jazz – Thelonious Sphere Monk – and he wrote its greatest torch tune, Round Midnight ("It's always night or else we wouldn't have light," he noted). He was dubbed onomatopoetically Melodious Thunk, the Ouliest Monk (and The Loneliest Monk, derived from Down Beat magazine's first mention – erroneously "Oelonious"). Hailed as the High Priest of Bebop, he was the inventor of bop – the pervasive improvisational genre that's arguably the 20th century's major music movement – who didn't really play it.

He wore a little goatee, green-tinted, horn-and-gold-rimmed glasses, large diamond-encrusted rings, and all manner of caps and hats purchased on whim. He lived in the same Manhattan neighbourhood most of his life. He kept his grand piano in the kitchen, oblivious to extraneous sounds. He obsessed over a single tune for days without sleep, then slumbered for 24 hours at a stretch. He stuck a picture of Billie Holiday on the ceiling so he could look at it while lying down, and paid his dues playing on a female evangelist's road show. He didn't feel the need to talk much, and was accused of being uncommunicative or, as in a Monk title, Mysterioso. But he never lied. His wife, Nellie, who fussed over him and let him be, said, "After all, if Thelonious isn't special, then what is?"

He was a big man with small hands, which he spread stiff-fingered to produce "crushed" chords, leading critics to say he couldn't play. His trademark dramatic dissonance, angularity, fractured rhythms, odd rococo riffs and cliff-hanging use of silence gave listeners "the sensation of missing the bottom step in the dark" (according to critic Whitney Balliett). He was both revered and loathed for being primitive and avant-garde. When his sidemen soloed, he twirled about the stage in a trance, then picked up at the piano at the last moment without missing a note. When he died in 1982, a recluse at the age of 65, he hadn't touched a piano in six years.

Monk's life is so cloaked in mystique that biographers have seemed emptyhanded or pedestrian. Finally, there's real light in The Thelonious Monk Reader, a collection of 39 pieces (written from 1942 to 1999) judiciously edited by Rob van der Bliek, music librarian at York University. His introductions are models of elegant clear-headedness, framing the controversies and conundrums so tellingly reflected in his wide-ranging selection.

The mainstream seal of approval for Monk came when he was made into a Time cover story in the issue of Feb. 28, 1964.

The original Down Beat dismissals of 1948-9 are hilarious (Round Midnight "is for the super hip alone ... his abstractions on these sides are just too too – and I played them early in the morning and late at night"). The interviews are inscrutable: "All you're supposed to do is lay down the sounds and let the people pick up on them. If you ain't doing that, you just ain't a musician. Nothing more to it than that."

"All you're supposed to do is lay down the sounds and let the people pick up on them. ... Nothing more to it than that."

Song titles told the story of his life. Monk's Mood; Blue Monk; Introspection; Ruby, My Dear; I Mean You; Ask Me Now; Well, You Needn't; Criss Cross; Brilliant Corners; Little Rootie Tootie; Rhythm-a-ning; Evidence; Epistrophy; Straight, No Chaser; Humph. Changing the order yields the same deliciously enigmatic puzzle.

As the house pianist at Minton's, the Harlem club that served as the bebop revolution's incubator in the early 1940s, Monk's unorthodox chord structures kept inept wanna-bes at bay. He saw Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and his protégé Bud Powell gain acceptance, and waited for the public to catch on to him "even if it does take them 15, 20 years," which it did. Unlike these luminaries, he had little stylistic influence for the simple fact that it's impossible to imitate his profoundly idiosyncratic music. "Weird means something you never heard before. It's weird until people get used to it. Then it ceases to be weird."

This brilliant artist suffered dumb luck. He wasn't offered a recording session until he was 30. Just as his breakthrough sides were released, he virtually disappeared from the scene after his New York City cabaret license was revoked for seven years, when he took the rap for drugs belonging to Powell. Time magazine's cover story on him was postponed as a result of JFK's assassination. When this mainstream seal of approval (reprinted here) finally appeared – fairly accurate and atmospheric, if a tad cloying – the jazz firmament that once attacked him as weird protested Barry Farrell's portrayal as stereotypically, well, weird.

Pianist and scholar Ran Blake debunks the notion of Monk's so-called technical deficiencies in a splendidly comprehensible musical analysis. Historian Carl Woideck argues that Monk's intensely personal deconstruction of hoary old Tin Pan Alley standards – he recorded Just a Gigolo and I'm Getting Sentimental Over You each six times – derived from love, not rebellion, as if he said, "This is the sound I like – and look, I found it right in the melody!"

Balliett famously wrote that his "improvisations were molten Monk compositions, and his compositions were frozen Monk improvisations." His tunes were propelled by stride-like rhythm, played off haunted melody. They were tinged with whimsy, humour, poignancy, vulnerability, yet were indestructible monuments of strength. (His tunes live on in numerous tribute projects, including Mountain's superb trio Evidence.) Listening to Monk is a paradoxical experience: expectation of constant surprise that never wears thin, yet as comforting as an old pair of slippers.

"I find something almost every time I sit down at the piano. No matter what's going on around me," he said. "Jazz is my adventure." And his music is our adventure. "That's it. Just using notes differently."

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There's more to this life than an accident

Run Over: A Boy, His Mother and an Accident
By Douglas Bell
Random House, 321 pp, $32.95

ELAINE KALMAN NAVES

Three years ago, while participating in a program in personal journalism at the Banff Centre for the Arts, I made the mistake one night of climbing into bed with an essay by one of my colleagues. The piece was to be workshopped the following day, and I planned to get a head start on my reading. I also hoped or expected that a few pages of my colleague's article would gently send me off to sleep from which I would waken refreshed and ready to reprise the balance of his story the next morning.

I spent a sleepless night. For I couldn't put down Douglas Bell's terrifying account of the accident that nearly killed him as a teenager until I reached the last word. And then I spent the rest of the night thinking about him and his mother, the story of whose terminal cancer he twinned with that of the accident.

You could make out an equally good case for saying that Doug Bell is a spectacularly lucky or spectacularly unlucky guy. Spectacularly lucky because he was born to wealth and privilege in one of Toronto's establishment families (his ancestors owned the land on which Sunnybrook Hospital stands). Lucky, too, because on his own merits, he's an extremely bright, personable, articulate and very funny man. An excellent journalist, he married a smart and good woman with whom he has two great kids (the older of them seems to have inherited Bell's ironic sense of humour. At age 6, she offered an alternate title for Run Over – Boom, Boom Crash; Nobody's Going to Buy This Book).

But Bell was spectacularly unlucky on June 10, 1974. Riding his bike to school, he was mowed down by a truck. Among many internal injuries, he suffered a ruptured liver and as an aftermath to the accident, at age 14, had a heart attack. The prognosis looked bleak, but when he turned to his mother and asked her if he would die, she replied that though he was very sick, he would indeed get better. Only years later would he discover that shortly before he sought her reassurance, she had prepared his obituary for the Globe and Mail.

Bell has a way of putting you right at the scene of his gruesome bedside in those critical days. Immediately after the accident, nearly 6 litres of fluid were withdrawn by catheter from his abdomen. "Down the length of my trunk I could see the maroon liquid running out of me the way water flows freely from an outdoor trap. ... The stuff reeked."

Bell was an only child. He had been a premature baby, born after a series of miscarriages. Even before the accident, he characterizes his mother's love for him as "insistent," "fierce" and "angry." He attributes his survival to the care of several fine physicians, whom he acknowledges fulsomely, and to the lifeline thrown him by his mother through the long months of his convalescence. Cicely Bell's "clawing, snapping, snarling will," her "fearsome, angry, ineffable love," kept him alive.

The accident irrevocably altered Bell's life and he believes that his trademark sense of humour was one of its legacies. He became a "laugh-in-the-face-of-adversity mensch." But his confidence in his body was shattered and a dangerous streak of self-destructiveness set in. The accident also left him with a long-term problem that no doctor warned him about: a lifelong predisposition to attacks of acute pancreatitis.

Acute pancreatitis, Bell writes, "is generally conceded to be the single most painful acute condition of the body." Between 1974 and 1986, he succumbed to it on three nightmarish occasions. The final episode came close to killing him than the accident had done.

This story of living with the consequences of a random and terrible event is anything but straightforward. As well as a coming-of-age memoir in which Bell takes an inordinately long time to grow up, it's a sometimes wry, sometimes poignant meditation on the nature of mortality. When his mother tells him in 1986 that, in her inimitable words, she has "a spot of terminal cancer," Bell resolves to reconstruct the era of the accident, square his debt of gratitude to her and find a new take on his suffering, "one that didn't assume that the course of my illness was, and would always be, the course of my life."

At its best, Run Over has the mesmerizing quality that hooked me the night I read its first pages in Banff. Bell's anguished attempts to reach out to his dying mother, and his heartbreak over the fact that he can't save her as she saved him, are beautifully rendered. Yet there are frustrating gaps in the narrative as well. Restored about his relationship with his father, maddeningly conflicted about his privileged background, and unsparing on the subject of his manifold ways of acting out over the decades, he made me periodically want to shake him and tell him to simply get on with things. No doubt this is easier for someone to say and do when she hasn't herself been run over.

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